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Facing Shrinking Salaries, SLC Faculty Voice a Need for Change

Isabel Lewis '25 and Javier Vela '25



Photo provided by Peggy Gould.

On Dec. 8 of last year, a petition was delivered to the Sarah Lawrence College President. One hundred sixty-eight faculty members handwrote their signatures to request that “President Cristle Collins Judd and the Board of Trustees...commit to a policy of annual percentage increases equal to or greater than annual Federal Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) for all teaching faculty at the College.” According to a source who was there, upon receiving the petition, Judd’s demeanor and posture changed and she seemed to recoil as the document was placed on the table.

This is not the first time Sarah Lawrence faculty has approached Judd and the Board of Trustees with concerns about pay. This has been an ongoing issue raised by multiple members of the SLC faculty, many of whom feel no substantial changes have been made by the institution to address their concerns.

This recent wave of organizing was prompted by a report presented by the Committee on Conditions of Teaching (CCT) in Dec. 2022. The CCT, which consists of three regular faculty members elected by the SLC faculty, shed light on what they said were, “dramatic differences in compensation increases among members of the college community.” The CCT report revealed that between 2012 and 2019, the annual adjustments for faculty salaries failed to match inflation, which caused a 6.1% decrease in the value of faculty salaries over these five years. Looking at more recent data, in the last five years there has been a 12% decrease in the value of salaries according to information provided by the Sarah Lawrence administration to faculty members.

The CCT report concluded, “The college’s financial resources would be used much more effectively if redistributed through the entire community.” The report presented a list of suggestions on how the school could redistribute its finances, which included annual cost of living increases for all faculty including guest faculty.

According to Peggy Gould, a dance professor at Sarah Lawrence, the COLA For All Petition that was delivered to the President in December was developed in response to Judd and the administration’s apparent disregard of the CCT’s proposal. Gould, who has been teaching at the school since 1999, is the current President of [SLC’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors](#), commonly referred to as AAUP. [AAUP](#) is a national organization that oversees collective bargaining and advocacy chapters. Although recognized as a chapter in Dec. 2020, Sarah Lawrence’s AAUP cemented themselves as an organization in 2023 after they publicly backed CCT’s 2022 proposal for cost of living adjustments and decided on their first campaign at the start of the school year: COLA for All.

The petition asks for a yearly cost of living increase to address the decreasing value of faculty salaries. According to the AAUP’s website, cost of living adjustments are “merely a starting point.” The COLA for All petition is in agreement, saying, “addressing the broader issues of salary compression and suppression will require further measures, but COLA For All is the foundation of any lasting compensation policy.”

During the fall semester, members of the AAUP, among other faculty members, pushed for a commitment to the cost of living adjustments, Judd told them an Employee Compensation Working Group was working on the first-ever compensation policy for the college. This working

group consisted of a few elected members who were a part of the school's Planning and Priorities Committee, also known as the PPC, which includes faculty and administrators. “[There were] questions about whether the administration was operating in good faith because [it had been] over a year [since CCT’s report and] nothing changed,” Gould said.

Over a year after the CCT came out with its report, in Jan. of this year, the Employee Compensation Working Group released its report and made its policy recommendations.

Neil Arditi, a literature professor on the PPC, was nominated and elected to the Employee Compensation Working Group. According to Arditi, who has been at Sarah Lawrence since 2001, when the CCT made its proposal in 2022, it got blowback from senior faculty and administration because they were skeptical about the presented data, so the working group was formed and “charged with making policy recommendations to the Board of Trustees.”

The working group made policy recommendations by comparing Sarah Lawrence to institutions that it often competes with for prospective students. Taking into account that larger colleges have different resources and that rural areas have different costs of living, the group tried to focus on liberal arts colleges that had similar costs of living, according to Arditi. Among other faculty, there has been some dispute about whether these comparator schools are in areas with similar costs of living. While some of the schools in this list are situated in metropolitan areas, such as Barnard in New York City or Occidental College in Los Angeles, others include Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA and Oberlin in Oberlin, OH, which have lower costs of living than Bronxville, NY.

The research of this working group found that Sarah Lawrence was paying its faculty significantly lower salaries than the deemed comparator institutions. The recommendation of the working group was, “The Board of Trustees should commit to making sure that the different faculty groups assistant, associate, and full never fall more than 10% behind the mean of what they’re getting paid at our competitor schools.” This doesn’t include guest faculty salaries.

“I would love to not be 10% behind,” Arditi said, but the Board of Trustees likely wouldn’t be receptive to anything more. He thinks 10% below the average is a reasonable starting point that is “palatable” to the Board.

Arditi also argued that COLA For All is not equitable because there is a significant disparity in faculty salaries. Some faculty members are making twice as much as others in the same department. Because cost of living adjustments are based on an individual's base salary, a person who is making twice as much is going to get twice as large of a cost of living adjustment, and with compound interest, the inequity will continue to extend. Arditi made this argument during the recent faculty meeting on Feb. 20.

David Peritz, a politics professor who attended that recent faculty meeting, was asked by The Phoenix his thoughts on Arditi’s argument that COLA for All was inequitable. “He’s right,” he said, but he quickly followed up by saying, “but there’s nothing in the [Employee Compensation Working Group’s proposal] that makes it any better.”

Peritz, who has worked at Sarah Lawrence for close to 25 years and has supported the school's food service and facilities workers in their organizing efforts, said, "The way I see COLA for All, [it's] not the only policy to address long-standing deep under compensation...it's just a guarantee that it won't get worse."

Peritz was also disheartened that the working group's proposal didn't include guest faculty in their compensation policy. He argued that to be a fair institution, "you attend to the needs of those who are worse off first." Arditi seems to agree with Peritz that guest faculty are treated poorly at Sarah Lawrence. Arditi said, "The guest faculty are the most abused," but he "personally [doesn't] feel like putting [the issue of guest faculty salaries] on the table at the same time as the regular faculty to the Board."

Judd was unable to meet with Phoenix for an interview but did answer questions via email. "There is no doubt that the cost of living associated with our location along with recent inflation poses real challenges to individuals," she wrote. But she argued that "COLA for all faculty" is "not the only tactic to address the gaps in salaries, nor necessarily the most effective, and it could actually inadvertently exacerbate inequities."

"I affirmed after CCT's report, the College recognizes the need to address salaries, especially of a number of our longer-term faculty and we have prioritized doing so," Judd wrote.

The topic of salary has been on the minds of many faculty members at Sarah Lawrence. A report was submitted to the SLC's Board of Trustees last semester about how "inadequate compensation" had weighed on them. Included in the report were quotes from separate faculty members about the subject:

"I am working under stress with a salary that I am having to stretch more and more."

"[I] will never be able to retire. Trying to figure out how to work forever."

"[In] October 2023, [I have] \$50 in my savings account. ... The pressure to meet monthly expenses is definitely increasing, as I now don't have a way to cover insufficient cash in the checking account."

"Perhaps the [Board of Trustees] should know that the faculty and staff feel in the end fundamentally disrespected by a stream of thanks from the administration that is not supported by adequate pay."

"The trustees should know that the College's suppression of faculty salary and benefits, combined with understaffing, has eroded working conditions to the point that several of us are reluctantly looking for work elsewhere."

"If the trustees were able to step in and support clear action in support of the faculty, it could make all the difference for individuals and for the institution as a whole," the report says.

“I came to Sarah Lawrence for the writing professors because I knew their work and loved their work,” Gabrielle Krieger ‘25 said. “Quality professors don’t want to come to this school if they’re paid 10% less than the average.”

Although there are disagreements about what steps the Board of Trustees needs to take to ensure that faculty salaries don’t continue to dwindle, what seems to be undisputed among many faculty members is that they are underpaid and there is a need for change.

Neil Arditi, David Peritz, and a third faculty member who spoke under the condition of anonymity all referred in interviews to something the former Dean of Faculty, Barbara Kaplan, had said: “We don’t need to exploit Sarah Lawrence faculty, they exploit themselves.”

According to [The Princeton Review](#), Sarah Lawrence is considered to have some of the best professors in the country, yet they are often paid less than their counterparts at “comparator” institutions.

David Peritz wrote in a statement to The Phoenix, “Many of us can’t or won’t leave or retire because we believe in the college’s mission and have sacrificed for it.” He added, “Our dedication means that we’ve built our lives around SLC, and would rather fight to restore the basic decency of its community and its capacity to continue its mission instead of abandoning it.” But when there are budget deficits, which there often are, many feel the college leans on faculty salaries as a way to reduce these budget gaps. It’s in the hands of President Judd and The Board of Trustees to make the changes.

“The board of trustees will dedicate significant time at its upcoming meeting to employee compensation and consideration of an employee compensation policy,” President Judd wrote in her email to The Phoenix.

The lingering question is whether this proposed compensation policy will effectively address the long-standing concerns of faculty members at Sarah Lawrence.

A correction was made on Oct. 18, 2023: *An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that one hundred fifty-eight faculty members signed the COLA petition.*

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